

GRAY'S COURT

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Gray's Court by Mary Constance Bourne

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MARY CONSTANCE BOURNE

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MARY CONSTANCE BOURNE.

LOUTH:

JACKSON AND PARKER, MARKET-PLACE.

LONDON:

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, & Co., STATIONERS' HALL COURT.

1882.

251. g. 617.

This tale, the incidents of which are taken from life, was written in the days when the writer was working heart and soul for God on Earth. And it is printed for circulation now that she has entered into her rest, as a testimony to what the Grace of God can do, and is doing, in the hearts of the children of men. This will give the book an interest for all Christians, and to those who knew the writer, the name on its title-page will make it a coveted and valued possession.

ALBERT SYDNEY WILDE.

Easter, 1882.

GRAY'S COURT.



CHAPTER I.

PLEASANTLY situated amidst the sheltering hills lies the small country town of Ludworth. While to the west the scenery is varied and picturesque, you have on the other hand a bleak, uninteresting reach of country open to our Eastern Coast with scarce a hill or tree to break the fresh pure air from the sea. The town itself is unpretending, and far behind this age of progress. Its glory centres in the noble Parish Church, whose lofty spire serves as a land-mark far and wide, pointing heavenwards, as though to lead one's thoughts beyond itself to the Temple on high. Beneath the Church's shadow stands the Rectory surrounded by stately elm trees, in whose wide spreading branches the rooks love to build. Homes of the rich, and homesteads of the poor, a Hospital, a Grammar School, some few public buildings, lastly the High-street, with the Library, and the attractions of Ludworth are quickly told. Passing by the larger houses

let us seek the humble cottage home in which our story opens. Standing a little apart from the street, in an obscure part of the town, though not far from the Church is Gray's Court.

At No. 2 we pause, and enter. "Come Jack, make haste, and be off to School. You'll be late again—it's a strange thing you can't finish your dinner when other folks do!"

The words were uttered in sharp impatient tones, and called forth a somewhat surly reply.

"I don't see why you should make such a stir, mother. It's ten minutes to two yet, and I haven't been late for ever so long!"

"Not since last time," retorted the mother, "and that's all you can say. Come, wash your hands and be off!"

At this moment the door opened and in trooped a family of children, varying in age from eleven to four years old.

"Not gone to school yet! why what have you all been up to? I sent you out ten minutes ago." "I want my cap mother," cried a boy of seven, instantly beginning a noisy search for the missing article.

"Mary wants her boot-lace tying!" shouted another child. "Fred, come away from that fire, you'll be burnt to death; there's the baby crying again; get away you children! you'll be the death of me!"

More rushing to and fro,—a clatter of plates and dishes,—a chair overturned,—angry words,—and a sharp hit or two, and the last child, down to an infant of four, had been

turned out into the street, and quiet was restored to the little cottage home.

Poor Mrs. Norton sat down on the nearest chair, her baby in her arms, and sighed heavily. A look of extreme weariness is in her face, an expression of restlessness and dejection in her eyes. Wearied with half a life, anxious, and full of care and forboding, spiritless, unrestful, her very life a burden, such was the sad and oft repeated story so plainly to be read there.

And yet Mrs. Norton was by no means an unthrifty woman. She was industrious, honest and true—or so she wished to be,—she prided herself on her good management. Though no children were more neat and tidy than her own, she had to work hard to keep them so, and in spite of ill-health from time to time she struggled bravely to keep up their character for respectability. This was what she lived for,—toiled for,—suffered for,—and nothing more; and her's was a sad and weary life.

There was another trouble too. Her husband was not the help he might have been. He was a hard-working man, it is true, always at his business, when he was in good health; but being by no means strong, he was often laid aside. This however was not the worst. Norton's great temptation was drink. Not that he was an habitual drunkard, but alas! so great a part of his much needed earnings was spent in drink, that the family always continued poor; and when mother was more cross than usual, the children knew it was because father had been taking

to his drink again. Often did the man resolve to forsake his sin. For a shorter or longer time he would abstain, and then the force of habit, so strong upon him, overcame him, and again he would give way,—helpless, hopeless, reckless. He knew his weakness, but turned not to the Giver of Grace and Strength. We vainly dream that in our own unaided might we can conquer the besetting sin. Hence “the broken vow; the frequent fall.”

But while Mrs. Norton is brooding over her troubles, and wondering how she is to pay her way, and get food enough for the family, when Saturday comes, we will first say a few words about that family. Ever since their marriage, eighteen years ago, Norton and his wife had been what the world would call unlucky. At first there was scarcity of work! then sickness came; and ere long, the wife's savings from hard years of honest service were exhausted. Then the first home had to be broken up, and they must seek work elsewhere, hoping for better times. From place to place they wandered, staying but a year or two at most, struggling hard with poverty, while hope and courage were ebbing fast out of their hearts. And then, more terrible than all, there came into the home, that fell foe *drink*, which breaks the true woman's heart, and perils the very soul of its victim,—but for the last few years, times have been somewhat better. About six years before the story opens, Norton heard there was a good opening in a large, respectable business at Ludworth; so thither the family made a final move, with such small possessions as

still remained to them. There were now seven children—William, the eldest, about fourteen, had lately been apprenticed to a trade; then came Jack, two years younger; Harry, a merry, bright-eyed boy of eleven; Lizzie, a gentle little maiden of nine years, who was always doing things for everybody; Robert, or Bob, as the children called him; Mary, the father's pet, and Freddy, the baby. Happily for him, Norton was fond of children, and although he was sometimes put out by conflicting tongues, yet he was a kind father, and in many ways a wise one.

But how they lived, was the wonder! Nine mouths to fill, and though the work was steady, the wages were but small; and then that fearful drink! But the boys were getting older every day, and soon would bring in some earnings. And may be brighter days were coming.

